

AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE GROWING TABLOIDIZATION OF NEWS COVERAGE ON DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

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Abstract

This study is a literature review to explore the effect of the growing tabloidization of news coverage on democratic politics. The study focuses on some important considerations, among which are three basic values of modern democratic societies, namely, freedom, justice and order, which it is vital to retain. While these basic values in mass media communication are not compromised, it is difficult to deny that the media, tabloid or not, cause a crisis in public life. This crisis means that ‘core values’ such as independence, diversity and objectivity risk being lost because of changes in the media. Such changes are due to pressures from the market and society, but these pressures have not been shown to hinder democratic life.

Keywords: Tabloidization, News coverage, Media, Politics, Journalism

Introduction

The term “tabloidization” refers to a new type of culture in the mass media which is characterized by the sensational. Tabloidization identifies a greater priority being assigned to the commercial aspects of media content and organizations, where the profit function is more important than any other outcome. More formally, tabloidization describes the shift in focus from hard news to salaciousness, sensation and entertainment (Hujanen 2005, 281).

Tabloidization is often used as a derogatory term because tabloid-style coverage has a tendency to reduce critical argument to mere rhetoric (Thussu 2007, 8). In his 1998 study on media and politics entitled “Hidden Agenda,” Pilger condemns tabloidization because of its association with corporate business. He wants the media to return to slow news rather than,

for example, the “self-congratulatory” portraits of politicians provided by their media associates.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to define tabloidization in a way which assesses its effects. To begin with, tabloidization is a process affecting not only the press but also the mass media in general, although the term is associated in the minds of the public with specific reference to newspapers (Harris, 2005).

Esser (1999) further identifies an important consideration: the spill-over effect of tabloid news into quality publications, which is a primary consideration here. This study examines the tabloid effect on the ‘serious media’ rather than the changing nature of tabloids. Tabloidization as a concept is more accurately applicable to quality media because it suggests an orderly evolution on the part of the quality media towards tabloid-style coverage. However, it may be a useful concept even when applied to ‘tabloids.’ To make a distinction, when referring to existing tabloid newspapers, the process of tabloidization can be described as an increasing focus on sex, scandal and sensation in news coverage (Johansson 2008, 402).

It is important to bring a multi-dimensional and flexible approach to this survey because the nature of tabloidization is not uniform. Different countries have experienced different processes in the ‘downgrading’ of news coverage (Thussu & Freedman 2003, 124). In fact, some studies have found that the media in some democratic countries, such as Germany, have not demonstrated much inclination toward tabloidization (Altmeyden 2010, 567-568).

In a broad study, it would be useful to examine a variety of nations to best ascertain how tabloidization can influence democratic politics. However, the present study focuses on the British experience, though without limiting the discussions to the UK. In addition, when setting the framework for this essay I gave no prominence to the long-term trajectory of tabloidization. Because of recent major changes in both the printed press and broadcast media and the continuing pressure on the visual media to attract viewers and hence ‘tabloidize,’ I found more than enough examples for assessing tabloidization without investigating changes that might have occurred before the 1990s (Harris, 2005).

This study examines the effects of tabloidization and observes that it did not cause a crisis in public life. \it first discusses the parameters and signs of tabloidization. The main text then weighs the evidence *for* and *against* the notion that tabloidization affects democratic politics, and comes to some conclusions (Kurtz et al., 1998, pp. 44-47).

Increasing tabloidization

The process of tabloidization is often associated with a decline in the standards of professional journalism (Olkkonen et al., 2011). Therefore, studies have used statistics from relevant media supervisory bodies to assess this claim. The supervisory body for the British press is the Press Complaints Commission (PCC). By analyzing the complaint records with PCC, we can highlight the trends and determine whether the media in recent years have abided by its standards (www.levesoninquiry.org.uk).

The focus of this essay is not on whether a tabloid-imitation process exists or the extent of such a process but on the effect of this process on democratic politics. Kurtz (1993) defines one aspect of tabloidization as a “change in the media’s assessment of what they think the voters need to know to evaluate a person’s fitness for public office” (Kurtz 1993 cited in Esser, 1999). This definition applies to the British newspaper industry because of the similarities between them.

In Britain, as in the US, nothing concerning the private lives of politicians is censorable. The media eagerly snatches stories about politicians’ family problems; extra-marital affairs and sexual activities are frequently exposed to provide maximum impact. People in public life do not have an automatic right to privacy. In fact, because sex boosts sales, whenever there is a scandal of a sexual nature, newspapers take the chance to make commercial gain from it (Leveson, 2012).

Esser (1999) quotes *The Sunday Times*, which argued in 1992 that the publication of stories about politicians’ private lives was a “legitimate matter to bring into the public domain” because they themselves were happy to use their private lives (family, new baby, etc.) for personal political ends.

Undoubtedly, the increasing tendency of the media to cover ‘trivial’ scandals and to exaggerate their consequences has had a negative effect on the genuine political battle between rival newspapers (Nyhan, 2013). However, critics should not be so harsh as to see this shift as a crisis in public life. It is not difficult, even for laymen, to distinguish between serious allegations of abuse of office and embarrassing sexual adventures. It is true that a public life crisis may be induced by an increasing public mistrust of politicians (Cameron et al., 2008). However, this process can only influence people who still consider sexual scandals to be an abomination. For most secular people, sexual scandals are not necessarily equivalent to incompetence. In any case, the mistrust issue, which is an argument used by many critics, is related to the lack of interest in politics and apathy. It has deeper roots, and is not merely the result of tabloidization (César, 2011).

There are other factors which have hindered political life more than tabloidization: one particular legitimate accusation is media bias (Scott and Kenneth, 2010). The objectivity of the media has come under continued attack in recent years, in particular after the invasion of Iraq (Derek, 2010). The media in the US and, to a lesser extent, in the UK followed the lines of each government in support of the war (Caldwell and Stroud, 2009). This practice was observed in the ‘patriotic’ style of the coverage of war and the ‘embedded’ reporting (Rodney, 2006). However, it remains difficult to lay the blame on tabloidization for this democratic failure.

Does tabloidization necessarily lead to a downgrading of political communication? Supporting Case

It has become fashionable for many groups, in particular those opposed to cooperation between government and ‘big business,’ to accuse the media of following trends harmful to political communication. These groups assert that the increasing commercialization in broadcasting has led to a downgrading of political information. The dawn of the age of commercial television in Europe was initially observed as an American imitation. Kees (1998) highlighted the displeasure of critics who insisted on old-fashioned values, with this perceived sudden increase in the commercial awareness of the media in the Netherlands. The purpose of political communication, they assert, is to inform the public about important issues and alternative viewpoints and not to entertain people with personalities, rumor and images.

Bulmer is a strong critic of the trend towards tabloidization. He insists that tabloidization caused a ‘crisis of communication for citizens’ (Bulmer 1990). This accusation implies that democratic politics are threatened because of the failure of media coverage to provide an accurate (or relevant) message to the voters about rival competing candidates. Bulmer complained that the ‘commercial deluge’ which has overwhelmed Europe has real and damaging consequences for democracy.

It is important to assess the argument presented by Bulmer’s camp. The foundation of this argument is observed in democratic theory, which supports the idea of collective decision-making through equal deliberations among members of the public. The best scenario would be the full participation of citizens with equal weighting to each one of them. However, for practical reasons, citizens delegate representatives, who deliberate and make decisions on their behalf. The process of delegation depends heavily on media outlets. The media allow the masses to receive information from rival candidates and hence make an informed decision. Before deciding whom to vote for in elections, people should have access

to a full range of ideas and individual stances on key issues; i.e., they should have access to complete and unbiased information.

In addition, in some cases, the public rapidly forms an opinion on certain issues of particular concern based entirely on what they read or hear in the media. Therefore, the role of the media is crucial. The role of the media in distorting equal access to information is a primary reason for the attack on tabloidization. On this point, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) write that the following features are imperative:

Surveillance of the socio-political environment, reporting developments likely to impinge, positively or negatively, on the welfare of citizens. Mechanisms for holding officials to account for how they have exercised power. Dialogue across a range of views, as well as between power holders (actual and prospective) and mass publics. Incentives for citizens to learn, choose and become involved, rather than merely to follow and kibitz over the political process. A sense of respect for audience members, as potentially concerned and able to make sense of his or her political environment.

In his critique on commercialization (i.e., tabloidization), Blumler (1990) rejects the modern publicity process, which uses the major mass media to exert influence over the public. Citizens are therefore potentially excluded from adding their input in public communication. He condemns the increasing preoccupation of politicians and journalists with their own ‘complex patterns of conflicts,’ which has resulted in *insiders* dominating the democratic circle at the expense of wider public participation (Blumler 1990).

Blumler comments on the preference among providers and viewers for entertainment as opposed to information. Because of this agreement on manner as well as content, news bulletins have begun to focus on presenting the most attractive events; current affairs programs have begun to present viewers with ‘spectator interests’; political competition is presented through ‘horse-race models’ and ‘chess-like scenarios’ and ultimately the ‘winning of slogans and soundbites over dialogue and substance’ (Blumler, 1992, cited in Brants, 1998).

The case against

Blumler provides a strong case that media coverage has deteriorated and this decline has had a negative overall influence on civic participation. Nevertheless, the case against such a notion has its supporters. Brants’ study (1998) forms the primary defense that is explored here. Brants (1998) surveyed European academic articles that assessed the individual experience of countries and cross-national studies. In his evaluation, Brants (1998) examined two domains of political communication which are relevant to this debate. The first

is television news, and the second is campaign communication. He found that neither of these domains had adverse effects on public life.

Brants observed that news programs on public broadcast channels in most European countries have not changed their slots outside prime time to compete with popular drama on commercial channels. In fact, the opposite may be true.

In terms of the growing sensational and provocative coverage in television in parallel with the tabloids, Brants notes that “...the picture is ambiguous, though tabloid television news ... is still practically absent in Europe, including most private channels.” Additionally, Brants finds that there is a slight tendency toward the popularization of news and politics; however, the nature extent of the quality of coverage has not been significantly affected.

In relation to television news coverage, Brants’ survey points to many examples of entertainment elements in political reporting; overall, however, the picture “...does not point to infotainment taking over and to an unequivocally bad influence of commercial television.” News remains an important part of television programming across Europe, and politics remains an integral part of news. Sensationalism and human interest have entered into news coverage but have made no significant effect on political reporting.

Newspaper changes

Even though most quality newspapers are becoming tabloid-sized, the accusation of their becoming tabloid in character does not seem to be correct. An assessment of the newspaper market indicates that the serious press has not diluted its coverage of politics (Biressi and Nunn, 2008).

The Guardian has included a blogs section in which laypeople can express their opinions on politics and general matters. This expansion of reader participation is favorable for the democratic scene. *The Independent* newspaper has shifted to a ‘tabloid style’ front page.⁹ However, a fair assessment of its front-page coverage indicates that the quality of its coverage has improved; more space is dedicated to exploring single issues, to the extent that readers can gain an up-to-date and comprehensive account of them.

Is now the time to question the ultimate effect of popularization on democratic politics? Because even if style takes precedence over content in media coverage, as in the United States, this change is not necessarily a cause for alarm, provided that this is the only change that occurs. Brants (1998) identifies three conditions that justify being alarmed at

⁹ BBC Radio 5 Live on 12 September 2005 in a discussion about new paper formats.

what has been called ‘infotainment’: “...if it becomes the dominant form in which politics is portrayed; if it is done to hide something else; or, if it leads to a distorted image of politics.”

Empirical studies indicate that the first condition is not met (Brants 1998). Gripsrud (2000) argues that both types of journalistic form – tabloid and serious – are important for citizenship and democracy. Gripsrud reminds us that discussions about political and ethical worries over media quality have been featured in public debates and media theory for a long time. According to Gripsrud, this continued criticism is proof that yearning for a golden age is unreasonable and that it further “...indicates that hopes for an entirely serious, enlightening, and ethically impeccable journalism are futile.”

The second condition relates to the diversion of attention from pressing issues to superficial issues. This condition has little credible support. The US has a long tradition of pursuing campaigns on pressing issues, but these campaigns are rarer in the UK. In Europe, the expansion of shallow political coverage, such as politicians participating in talk shows, is now important for public relations and the electorate has come to value these appearances (Maxwell, 2008). Politicians who make heavy use of such self-promotion are, however, bound to attract negative comments from their more traditional rivals.

Although attempts are frequently made to hide important issues of concern from the public, the general picture always tends to be revealed because of the diversity of the press, in particular during electoral campaigns, when information matters the most (Uribe and Gunter, 2004),).

The third condition – the implication of a distorted image of politics – assumes that style seduces people and marketing plans easily fool them. This belief derives from the assumption that voters base their judgments on the appearances of the people who will represent them but not on a rational analysis of what is in the best interest of their country or community. Even if, under these assumptions, one takes citizens to be consumers, as the media have often depicted them, citizens rarely make irrational choices in normal circumstances. Thus the third condition is also not satisfied, and there is no evidence for the assumptions it makes (Aron and Anthony, 2005).

The potential for meeting these conditions is greater not as a result of the tabloidization process but in response to another type of media change. The single aspect that may most significantly undermine democratic politics is not the tabloidization of the press and broadcasting but, rather, the concentration of ownership. A free market has the capacity to provide progressive, modern forms for both the press and broadcasting without impeding the democratic health of the nation. Curran (1997) contends that when competition is present

in the media, the result is a system devoid of “conflict between the needs of society and the functioning of the market system.”

On balance, tabloidization is not to blame

Critics of the increasing commercialization of the coverage of politics, such as Blumler, denounce even the most direct means for public participation. *Question Time*, a weekly BBC TV program, is an example of such a forum and is considered one which encourages citizens to challenge decision-makers and may even influence them. Blumler describes live-audience programs such as *Question Time* as ‘spectacle and theatre’ that suffers from ‘glitziness and shallowness.’ He sees a clear flaw in such ‘simplistic populism’ because it allows for a minimal exchange of views and no deliberation.

However, the coverage of politics in the UK ranges from expert deliberative programs to more simple talk shows. Hence, the opportunity for being informed exists for people of all levels of ability and curiosity, except those who are completely indifferent (Andrew, 2012).

Moreover, some democratic theory does not support the ideal of public discourse empowering citizens and giving them voice and agency. These critics condemn the democratic theory ideal as ‘a romantic fantasy.’ They assert that it is natural for citizens to be passive, inactive and limited in their political participation in a well-functioning, representative democracy led by parties (Gamson 2001). Most people have neither the will nor the ability to master the issues at stake and go on to a perfectly weighted decision. Hence, the argument using democratic theory as a whole to criticize the effects of tabloidization is not relevant (Clayman, 2002).

The ideological gap between parties has become narrower; therefore, the old-style battle lines are no longer as important as they used to be. Given these deep changes – which were unthinkable only twenty years ago – it is not surprising to see a shift toward the superficial. In this age of increased obsession with celebrity, differences in approach and style may, for some people, be a decisive factor and, hence, deserves coverage (Lloyd, 2004, p. 126).

Conclusion

The media are seen as a public watchdog whose role is to oversee the state. Hence, it is normal for media outlets to expose abuses in the exercise of state authority. The present study has discussed the tabloid -style search for scandal and the modern ‘trial by ordeal’ as the only means of redress against political corruption or incompetence. It went on to discuss the role of journalists to hold politicians to account; although rough justice, this is a useful safeguard against corruption.

Since they retain three basic values of modern democratic societies: freedom, justice and order, in mass media communication, it is difficult to argue that the media, tabloid or not, have so far caused a crisis in public life. This means that 'core values' such as independence, diversity and objectivity have not been lost because of changes in the media. Changes in the media have arisen due to market and social pressures, but these pressures have not been shown to hinder democratic life.

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